

MOUSSE MAGAZINE

DECEMBER 20, 2019

ALL THINGS TEXAN: WILL BOONE

by Chiara Moioli



"Will Boone: The Highway Hex" installation view at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2019-2020

"Dyeing all my colors red
Fallen for a clear mile
Bound for all the sun to spoil"

—Phoria, "Red," from *Volition* (London: X Novo / Akira Records Limited, 2016)

John Steinbeck's memorable statement, "Texas is a state of mind. Texas is an obsession," might work flawlessly as the subtitle of Will Boone's current show at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston.¹ Curated by Patricia Restrepo, CAMH exhibitions manager and assistant curator, *The Highway Hex* is the first solo museum exhibition by the Houston-born and Los Angeles-based artist, featuring all new works, including a site-specific installation, paintings, sculptures, and Boone's first long-form video, *Sweet Perfume* (2019). That last crystallizes many of the tropes the artist has been playing with in recent years: what the Lone Star State means to outsiders and insiders alike; California's magnetic pull that seems to wondrously attract all kind of sprawling misfits looking for fortune; why people leave Texas and why they come back; the space and time between California and Texas—a Twilight Zone-ish twenty-four-hour drive along the insanely straight Interstate 10. Blending the artist's personal history with that of the video's character, Face (a take on *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*'s villain, Leatherface), *Sweet Perfume* conjures a narrative that begins where Tobe Hooper's horror cult film left off: after Leatherface finds himself alone, his designated victim and final girl escaped, frantically dancing

in the sunrise. “What if he became another person?” the artist challenges. In the following exchange, Boone compares his Texan-ness to a tattoo; analyzes the psychology behind Sweet Perfume’s Face; opens up about his unconventional, DIY practice, including his rather bizarre props made for the movie—weird paraphernalia of underbelly Americana, included in the installation at CAMH; Texas music legends; cars as the best place to listen to music; the color red; and, by all means, monsters.

CHIARA MOIOLI: Approaching *The Highway Hex*, I got trapped in a sort of Droste effect: You were born in Houston. Your first solo museum exhibition is being held in your hometown at CAMH, and centers on the mystique and symbolism of Texas. Its main piece and your first long-form video work, *Sweet Perfume*, is a take on the cult horror flick *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. Paintings like *Lazy X* (2019) appropriate Texan icons—in this case, a state trooper jacket. Let’s talk about the Lone Star State—how it is perceived (from the outside, in the collective perspective, and from the inside, in the U.S. context), the culture of the South, and its legacy.

WILL BOONE: It can be hard to see something from the inside. I spent my formative years in Texas but I was always looking outward with a bit of yearning. Once I finally managed to leave for good, I questioned the imprint that the state left on me. My Texan-ness began to feel like a tattoo—something that might be admired in some situations, but maybe I should conceal it if I was going to a job interview. I was always wondering: What was the place I had come from? What is real about it and what was projected? There is a certain measure of performance and theater to all things Texan. In Texas, it is conceded that part of everything is a lie without making it less true or less real. It is physically large, twice the size of Italy, yet it still feels hard to see—it’s blurry like a hot road. It’s even harder to understand. I have come to think that these concerns are not exclusive to someone from Texas. The fact that Texas is so hyperbolic and “big” allows for all the complications, and cracks and ugly and funny parts to be magnified so they are easier to see and more fun to look at.

CM: *Sweet Perfume* develops a loose narrative around Leatherface (nicknamed Face in the video), portraying the infamous chainsaw-less freak, expunged from the context of a horror movie, living (almost) composedly in the hills overlooking East Los Angeles. “So how is it out there in California?” a voice-over says in the video. “I heard they call it the land of fruits and nuts, so I bet you are getting along fine and fitting right in.” California is portrayed as a land of wealth and opportunity, a place “with laser beams and hollow grams, ten-dollar orange juice, twenty-dollar hot dogs, medicinal cocaine.” What’s the relationship between Texas and California—in your movie, in your life, and in Face’s?

WB: There is a strange temporal shift that happens while going between Houston and Los Angeles. It was the first long drive I ever did. It’s twenty-four hours and you go through a couple of time zones. If you leave Houston, you drive for twelve hours before you get out of Texas. It feels like a joke. You don’t make a single turn, and you are on Interstate 10 the entire time. California, especially Los Angeles, has this magnetic pull that attracts the weirdos from all the other states. It’s a place where people hope to discover or find something—gold, fame, themselves. People move to California to escape places like Texas. Texas scares some people. Cady Noland said that violence is connoted by a word like “Texas” and that it became shorthand

for Kennedy's assassination. The Misfits, from New Jersey, have a song that says "Texas is the reason that the president's dead." At the University of Texas football games, the crowd sings a fight song—"The Eyes of Texas Are Upon You." Texas feels anthropomorphic.

CM: *Sweet Perfume's Face* behaves like he's still a misfit, but one who's trying his best not to be one, often against his nature: instead of cutting off people's limbs, he chops up cactuses with an electric kitchen knife to cook a mysterious greenish fizz; he even trades his chainsaw for a hat in a pawnshop, but, taking advantage of a moment of distraction on the part of the owner, he steals his pickup's keys and runs away with the vehicle to return to Texas—driving for hours along Interstate 10 while Joe Savage's "Texas Is My Home" and "Awful Dreams" by Lightnin' Hopkins play on the stereo. There's a tension between good and evil that is hard to resolve. Can you expand on your own version of Leatherface? What's the psychology behind your character?

WB: It was once suggested that I use a cut-out image of Leatherface in an installation as a symbol of Texas. I hadn't seen the movie in at least a decade, but I remembered that at the end, when the sun is coming up and the girl has been rescued by a trucker, Leatherface starts to dance. I began to see Leatherface as a pit bull, like a person who has been trained and weaponized. Poor old Leatherface. Sure, he has done these terrible things, but maybe he didn't really want to. Could he be rehabilitated? My wife was reading a book about psychedelic healing. I started thinking about combat veterans taking psilocybin, Mike Tyson taking frog venom DMT, and rich people going to ayahuasca spas. California is the place where people go to change themselves—a place where identity and biography are completely malleable. How about Leatherface goes to California and has a vision quest? Leatherface sheds his traumatic past and lives peacefully as a scavenger, hiding in the pockets of undeveloped East Los Angeles like a coyote. What if he became another person?

CM: What about the soundtrack accompanying *Sweet Perfume*? It clearly pays homage to Texas musicians—starting from the title, which is referenced in the final dialogue of the video and is also a 2011 album by Texas music legend Sonny West. How was it composed and recorded?

WB: I saw the video as a receptacle for content that didn't fit in my other work—a see-through closet where things felt "put away" but could also remain visible—and also a way of employing songwriting in a non-performative way. The majority of the soundtrack was recorded live in my painting studio with my friend Lucas, who I have been making music with since we were in Houston in our early twenties. What I couldn't create musically, I lifted—including a recording of Lydia Mendoza playing in a bar, and a Lightnin' Hopkins song from a compilation of Texas songs that my wife made. He is a real Texas hero, inspiring everyone from Townes Van Zandt to the Geto Boys. The song was playing in the car while we were filming, so we just left it in the movie. The car is the best place to listen to music, but my stereo is slowly dying. Right now sometimes when a song is playing, you can only hear some of the instruments. On one song, it cut out the vocals. I recorded the song through my car stereo and I used this in two scenes of the film.

CM: *The Highway Hex* refers to "highway hypnosis," or "white line fever"—a peculiar condition where a driver enters an altered mental state and can drive for great

distances in a safe manner with no memory of doing so. Texas and California are connected by Interstate 10, which in *Sweet Perfume* is crossed by Face during the day and the night. While the film is mostly set in the open desert in the purest, most dazzling light, the exhibition at CAMH is set in a gloomy, subterranean space, dimly lit by faint red lamps—recalling brake lights in the dark along I-10—imbuing the location with the feeling of a horror movie set. Tell me more about this duality.

WB: I was familiar with CAMH's space and I saw it as an opportunity to take advantage of the lack of natural lighting. I was thinking about how Elvis put tin foil over his windows in Palm Springs to make it dark and cool in the desert. I was thinking about how time stops in a dark motel room with a TV running. I was thinking about basements, which are exotic along the Gulf Coast, and what people do in them. In my painting studio, I built a set that is a bar room lit with red Christmas lights. I transferred this into the museum, but combined it with another set, a pawn shop, and rebuilt it as a hybrid. I was interested in the way those lights can look like tail lights, especially on a highway like I-10 that is crowded with eighteen wheelers at night. I also like how these lights are often taken out of the context of a Christian celebration and used to light honky-tonk bars, which symbolize sin and temptation in country music. Talking about William Eggleston, the musician David Berman said that it looked warm inside his photos. I wanted it to look warm inside the museum. Sometimes institutions feel cold and white, like an empty fridge.

CM: *The Highway Hex* includes sculptures you employed as props in *Sweet Perfume*, ranging from a homemade jukebox—*A Picture of Me (without You)* (2019)—to the weirdest paraphernalia that furnished the set in the video's pawnshop and bar, recreated in full for the show. There's definitely a gusto for odds and ends, and a strong DIY approach that falls outside of the fine arts framework.

WB: "Prop" is short for "stage property," and as a verb, "prop" means to support. I wanted to use collected materials as a spine that would reinforce or support the information I wanted to communicate in the video. I was interested in how I could use physical objects to develop the identity of a person or a place. Los Angeles is full of prop houses where you can rent objects, but I wanted to use my own stuff. Almost everything came from my house or studio. The objecthood of a prop gets weird. After it gets used, something can be imbued with a meaning or a power that didn't exist in its regular life as an object. Almost like it was used ceremonially.

CM: Red is—tautologically—the fil rouge connecting the many elements composing the exhibition, starting from its light design. Red radiates from sculptures like *The River* (2019), a red-neon-lit, twenty-foot-long wooden model of the Los Angeles River, and a red neon leaning on the floor also lights up a truck's seat in *Resting Place* (2019). Above all, your new series of large-scale, assemblage paintings titled *Arterials* (2019) feature an eye-burner cadmium paint like on a muscle car. Blood is a direct reference here, as is the highway.

WB: I think my relationship with color comes from my early days making concert posters and shirts. When you add a color to a silkscreen print, it complicates things. There is an urgency or a frenetic energy that is lost when a process is expanded. Silkscreen printing is physical and active, and I believe that some of this energy is transferred into the print, similar to a drawing or painting. If it takes too long and the energy gets lost, it can end up feeling dead. It's like recording music live in one take versus going track by track and doing each instrument. I've carried this into

my painting without thinking about it. My choice of color is very specific. I will only use a color after I've seen it somewhere—on a car, a sign, or something like that. Normally I don't have a lot of colors that I use.

CM: From masks depicting zombies (*Freak* [2018], *Friend Mask* [2018], *Wretch* [2019]), to busts of headless corpses (*Frankenstein* [2017]) and homages to slasher cults (*Jason Mask (glo)* [2014], *Sweet Perfume* [2019]), you seem quite obsessed with horror, monstrosity. Can you retrace the development, and the reasons, behind this visceral fascination?

WB: Monsters are part of the deal. A lot of my favorite artists (Katsushika Hokusai, Francisco Goya, Mike Kelley) use monsters in their work. The Texan musician Roky Erickson played what he called horror rock, borrowing themes from horror and science fiction while maintaining the minimal level of saccharinity to be considered rock and roll. I think this has influenced my visual work. A few months ago, my mom sent me a drawing I made when I was four. In the corner "Happy Dracula" is written in an adult's handwriting. Dracula looks stoned—he's got bloodshot eyes and a smile ear to ear. Red teardrops fall from his face.

[1] John Steinbeck, *Travels with Charley: In Search of America* (New York: Viking, 1962).

Will Boone (b. 1982, Houston) lives and works in Los Angeles. Selected solo shows include Galerie Patrick Seguin, Paris (2018); *Garage*, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles (2018); *Sea Wall*, Karma, New York (2017); *Scenes*, 163 N. Mission Road, Los Angeles (2016); *Paradise*, Rubell Family Collection, Miami (2014); *GRACELAND*, Karma, New York (2014); *GOLIAD*, Jonathan Viner, London (2014); *Sigils*, Karma, New York (2013); *Yes No Goodbye*, Karma, New York (2012); and *Psycho Ads*, Karma, New York (2011). He has participated to the group exhibitions *Zombies: Pay Attention!*, Aspen Art Museum, Colorado (2018); *Monument*, Desert X, Coachella Valley, California (2017); *Concrete Island*, VENUS, Los Angeles (2017); and *White Trash*, Lühring Augustine, New York (2017). Boone's works reside in the Rubell Family Collection, Miami; Fundación Baruch Spinoza, Lisbon; Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam; and Sammlung Goetz, Munich.